

Response to Anna Quindlen's "Homeless":

Paragraph by paragraph summary:

- ¶1: While doing a story on homeless people, Quindlen meets Ann, a woman who claims she is just passing through and who pulls out photographs to prove it.
- ¶2: The photos don't contain people or pets but an everywhere yellow house, neither suburban nor city, and even though Ann's coat and bag were worn and shadowy, Quindlen knows what Ann is trying to tell her: "You are where you live. She was somebody" (177).
- ¶3: Quindlen focuses more on the details than the big picture and is upset that so many don't homes. She's not talking about places to keep warm and dry or where welfare checks can be sent, though these are important for survival, but places that evoke memories of home.
- ¶4: "Home is where the heart is" (177), by which she means a place with faults and quirks that are uniquely hers.
- ¶5: But we've been losing the sense of home her parents and grandparents had, replacing it with a transient sense of home, a place "where you lived for three years, until you could move on to something else and something else again" (177).
- ¶6: So now we come to something even worse, to children who don't know what a home means because they have never had one and to adults who no longer have a room to make their own and who are reduced to pulling photos from bags. "Homes have stopped being homes. Now they are real estate" (177).
- ¶7: But people find it curious that some would rather sleep sitting up on benches rather than go to a shelter. And while some suffer mentally and are afraid of the violence, others will not compromise their need for home they can make their own just to get food and a place to sleep: "One room," a woman said, "painted blue" (178).
- ¶8: While some compassionate people are working on the homeless problem, most walk around it or turn it into an issue rather than "a collection of human beings. We turn an adjective into a noun. The poor. Not poor people" (178).
- ¶9: Sometimes we would be better off to focus on the details, people like Ann, who aren't homeless but are people without homes.

Intro:

Beginning: In "Homeless" by Anna Quindlen, she writes that she meets a homeless woman, Ann, who claims she's not homeless because she has a photo of a yellow house.

Middle: Quindlen understands what Ann is trying to tell her because Quindlen feels that a home is a unique place that can't be replaced by a shelter.

End: Unfortunately, Quindlen concludes, our sense of home has changed significantly, but people like Ann remind us that the homeless, more than being a group of poor people without homes, are people who are rootless.

Thesis: While I initially disagreed with Quindlen that the homeless were people for whom I should have individual compassion, she ultimately convinced me that I should focus more on what they need rather than who I think they should be.

Compare-Contrast Brainstorming Table:

Quindlen	Me
She meets Ann, a nice, non-threatening woman who shows her a picture of a house.	More often than not homeless people I meet either scare me because of their screams and gestures or disgust me because I think they're lying to me.
Quindlen believes that a home is a very special place that is uniquely ours because of the funny, quirky things that comprise it.	I agree that you have to make a place special by doing things to make it unique before it becomes a home. My wife and I believe this so much that we tow a travel trailer around rather than stay in a motel or hotel because we prefer our unique "home" even if it's tiny.
Quindlen thinks we should look into the group at the individuals and understand why some of them live the way they do.	Reading this reminded me of my own desire for a unique place, which reminds me that even the boxes on San Francisco street may be better on a rainy night than a shelter where everything belongs to someone else.

Outline:

Title: The Homeless Need More Than A Blue Room

Introduction: See above

Body ¶1:

TS: I felt manipulated by Quindlen at first.

PS1: Ann is nice because she pulls a photo from her bag rather than a knife.

PS2: I'm always on my guard when we go to San Francisco.

PS3: The other day I was scared we would be attacked.

Body ¶2:

TS: But the homeless aren't like me, so I run the risk of not understanding who they are.

PS1: Quindlen reminds us that if we look beneath the surface of people, we may be surprised at what we find.

PS2: I have to be especially careful when I meet people who aren't like me because I run the risk of putting them down or discounting their experiences.

PS3: Using the example of a home, Quindlen is telling us to be mindful that even though we're different, we're all human.

Conclusion:

Turning Point: Thinking that Quindlen's essay was about how the homeless need a place to live like anyone else, an argument with which I now agree, the point could also be made that a unique home where one can paint a room blue or red or black is just one of many things we should provide the homeless. But certainly we can only know what the homeless need if we understand them not as "nouns" but as unique people with memories and aspirations.

Anticlimax: Quindlen mentions but doesn't focus on those who avoid shelters because of mental illness. We should understand their needs as well. And shouldn't we provide a place free of fear for those who, instead of wanting to paint a room blue, would like to read a book or watch a movie on TV.

Resolution: So yes, Ann needs a home that she can call her own, but to be a compassionate people, we should take the time to understand and help even those who don't have pictures of yellow houses in their soiled bags.

The Homeless Need More Than A Blue Room

In "Homeless" by Anna Quindlen, she writes that she meets a homeless woman, Ann, who claims she's not homeless because she has a photo of a yellow house. Quindlen understands what Ann is trying to tell her because Quindlen feels that a home is a unique place that can't be replaced by a shelter. Unfortunately, Quindlen concludes, our sense of home has changed significantly, but people like Ann remind us that the homeless, more than being a group of poor people without homes, are people who are rootless. While I initially disagreed with Quindlen that the homeless were people for whom I should have individual compassion, she ultimately convinced me that I should focus more on what they need rather than who I think the homeless should be.

I felt manipulated by Quindlen at first because she picked as her homeless person not a drunk screaming obscenities at her but a woman, Ann, who says that she's not really homeless, just passing through the Port Authority terminal. Ann pulls a photo of a yellow house from her bag instead of a gun, so of course I felt Quindlen was setting me up. I agree that "Home is where the heart is" (177) since I, too, value my home that is decidedly quirky with a leaky roof. But the homeless I've met, mostly men, have lived in cardboard boxes, reeked of urine, and have scared me half to death. When my wife and I go into San Francisco in the evening to see a play, I'm constantly on my guard because the homeless, or at least the panhandlers, are everywhere. The other evening in Walnut Creek a well-dressed woman wearing makeup stopped us and asked for money. She said that she was trying to get into a shelter. I asked her where the shelter was, and she started talking about Concord. Even though my wife and I didn't believe a word she was saying, we gave her money, but we were certain that we had been had. Perhaps I should have asked her if she had a picture of her home.

While this was my rather strong reaction on my first read, after I read the essay a second time, I began to sense how insensitive I was being. To be sure, the homeless aren't like me. They can be crazy, filthy and violent. They can quickly turn a good day into a gut-wrenching confrontation. But I know that when people aren't like me, I run the risk of misunderstanding them, and this is especially true if they make me fearful. Quindlen reminds us that to look more closely if we want to understand others. In Quindlen's case she focuses on the home since, as she explains, for her a quirky home has always been essential. And Quindlen resents the way homes have become less sacred, changing from places where parents and grandparents lived and died into just so much real estate to be bought and sold. So even if the woman in Walnut Creek didn't have a photo of her house in her bag, she would have had other things she could have told me about her past if I had bothered to ask her rather than interrogate her. I needed to remember that while her situation is different from mine, she's a vulnerable human like me.

Thinking that Quindlen's essay was about how the homeless need a place to live like anyone else, an argument with which I now agree, the point could also be made that a unique home where one can paint a room blue or red or black is just one of many things we should provide the homeless. But certainly we can only know what the homeless need if we understand them not as "nouns" but as unique people with memories and aspirations. Quindlen mentions but doesn't focus on those who avoid shelters because of mental illness. We should understand their needs as well. And we should provide a place free of fear for those who, instead of wanting to paint a room blue, would like to read a book or watch a movie on TV. So yes, Ann needs a home that she can call her own, but to be a compassionate people, we should take the time to understand and help even those who don't have pictures of yellow houses in their soiled bags.